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ABSTRACT

Twenty-five students, all undergraduates except one, were informally surveyed to determine their attitudes toward the use of word processing in the writing of student papers. Their responses indicated that the use of a word processor was a matter of personal choice with such factors as speed, convenience, storage, and print-outs cited as advantages by those who used a word processor. Students who did not use a word processor seemed to feel that it was not necessary to their work. However, all students agreed that using the word processor did not affect the quality of the content of their themes. The opinions of various educators on this issue are also reported, and it is concluded that the word processor can enhance the teaching of written composition, but that it should never be used as a substitute for teaching the basic elements of good writing. (8 references) (EW)

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Students, Their Writing and the Word Processor

What is it that teachers expect to find in their students' writing? What are their priorities, and how will they go about helping their students to achieve them? What part will the word processors play?

Some teachers (mostly teachers of English) have voiced their expectations: They want to motivate their students to write; they want them to read good literature which can provide them with models of good writing; they want them to be proficient in the mechanics -- correct grammar, correct spelling, etc., so essential for accurate communication; they want them to come to grips with their own thoughts about the topic on which they are writing, analyze, evaluate, organize, and synthesize these thoughts and write them in a way that they are communicated to the reader as the writer intends them to be communicated; and, finally, they want them to increase the quantity as well as the quality of their writing.

Other teachers (mostly content area teachers) have made it clear that they were more interested in learning whether or not their students had learned the subject matter taught.

Lucille Vaughan Payne (6) has written, "No book, of course, could supply you with all the elements that go into a writer's style, for ultimately your style reflects everything that you are -- your attitudes, your capacity for thought and feeling, the whole quality of your mind and imagination. A book can only point out those elements of style that are common to all good

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writing and explain some of the techniques that experienced writers have learned to use, or use instinctively in the practice of their craft."

Payne has suggested the use of the essay in promoting good writing. After likening a student to a machine when he/she feeds back information given by the teacher, she says, "But a student is a no machine when he writes an essay; he is a human being expressing not only what he knows but what he IS."

Apparently, there are teachers whose feelings about teaching writing are similar to Payne's. Dr. Friedman, Head of the English Department of Flushing High School in Queens, New York, directs a program in which reading and writing are balanced. The students write original essays, fables and poems, and, concurrently, read and discuss examples of these in literature.

What part can the word processor play in achieving the aims as expressed above? Ruth J. Kurth (4) undertook a study which provides some answers to this question. She summarized her study thus:

> Word processing programs can be used to enhance the teaching of written composition. The results of this study show that students can learn basic word processing skills quickly with only limited practice, and that the use of word processing does have motivational value. However, the study did not support the idea that working with word processing will automatically increase the quantity and quality of student compositions. The use of word processing can only enhance the teaching of written composition. The most important ingredient in any composition program is a teacher who is knowledgeable about the composing sequence.
>
> Instruction in pre-writing activities,

> organizational methods, draft writing, revision skills, and provision for publishing student work are necessary parts of any composition instruction with or without word processing. The use of word processing cannot substitute for quality instruction in the entire writing process. However, the use of computer word processing seems to have motivational value, seems to facilitate group discussions about writing, and may help foster peer editing.

Many of the titles found in current issues of reputable educational periodicals also express the motivational value of the word processor and an improvement in editing through its use. These expressed values raise some questions:

Will the motivational value last?
Is there a more cost-effective means of improving editing?

O'Donnell, Larson, Dansereau, and Rocklin (5) undertook a study to examine the effects of cooperation and editing on instruction writing performance. At the conclusion of their study, they admitted the need for further research; however, they did conclude that "dyadic cooperative writing production appears to be a powerful tool for improving writing skills and one that can be implemented easily in the classroom."

Fitzgerald, Spiegel and Teasley (2) found that instruction in story parts can help some students to write better stories. The parts they offered are setting, beginning, reaction, goal, attempt, outcome, and ending. They offer as an example a short story including each of these parts. In closing, they offered two stories, one written by a girl before she received instruction in story parts and the other after instruction which, they

claim, is easily implemented in the classroom. Of course, the switching of story parts until the writer gets them in the desired order is said by some to be readily accomplished through use of the word processor.

James Kilpatrick (3) who writes a syndicated column offered several amusing examples of the word processor's failure to detect serious errors in a theme, among them, a properly spelled word in a wrong context or a wrong word in a particular context. Two examples follow:

> (1) The Associated Press in Montgomery, Alabama, recently described a bill that would allow "the governor and the state conversation commissioner to void certain annexations of state park property." "A conversation commissioner?" Kilpatrick asks.
>
> (2) No computer could have helped a Cleveland reporter who covered an accident on Rockwell Avenue one evening in September. A young man, slightly soused, fell off the back of a truck and landed "flat on his back." Passersby found him "prone on the sidewalk". No, sir. Someone who is flat on his back is not prone, but rather supine.

Of course, wonders of the computer continue to surface. We are currently viewing on TV another of its wonders. It can select the fitting word upon hearing the context -- words such as right or write, your or you're, etc. whose use depends entirely on the text despite the fact that they sound alike.

It has always been thought (still is) that students themselves are a good source that educators could, and should, use to gain knowledge about problems confronting the students. It is strongly felt that if students are interviewed in a non-threaten-

ing environment, they will shed a lot of light on their concerns, and, to the discerning and knowledgeable educator, a possible solution might well be very clear. This applies even to the very young children. A particular case is recalled:

When little John was asked why he was crying, he replied, "It's them there valves (vowels) that gits me." John's auditory perception was extremely poor, yet he was being taught by a strictly auditory approach. Most would agree that it's very difficult for a small child with poor auditory perception to distinguish between ĭ and ĕ, for example, but, for communication purposes, there is a great difference between words such a "sit" and "set". Fortunately, distinguishing between ĭ and ĕ is not the only way to master these words.

To confirm or deny various written reports about the use of the word processor in the writing of themes, it was decided to ask some students attending a prestigious university, well-equipped with word processors. As a matter of fact, some students own their own and are willing to share with others.

Twenty-five students, all undergraduates but one, were approached, one by one, anywhere they happened to be met on campus and asked, "Do you use the word processor in writing your themes, and do you find it helpful?" Those who said they didn't use it, were asked to explain. Fourteen reported that they do not use it, and eleven reported that they do.

Typing ability seems to have been a factor. Some who don't use it claimed that they wrote much faster than they typed. Some

of those who used it claimed the opposite -- they typed faster than they wrote. One young man expressed, in very colorful language, the need for using his fastest means of recording -- typing in this case -- because, "I don't want my thoughts to get away from me." A young lady reported, "I've learned to create while using the word processor."

Courses of study seemed to be another factor. An English major expressed it thus: "I'm an English major. I probably would use the word processor if I were a history major dealing with factual material, but I like to make a LOT of changes in my writing, so it's easier for me not to use it." Some science and math majors said that they hadn't felt the need for using it -- that they didn't have that much editing to do.

Several questions come to mind:

1. Is writing in which more than the giving back of factual information limited to English classes?
2. It is felt that "creative" writing can be done in the content areas. (One young lady, a history major says she does it). Why isn't this practice more widespread?

One young woman who described herself as a dyslexic said that the word processor was a great help to her because she made a lot of transpositional errors in her spelling.

Of the fourteen who don't use the word processor, two said that they didn't know how; one remarked, "I suppose I ought to learn how to use it"; another explained, "I suppose I'll be forced to use it in five or ten years"; and one claimed, "I'd use it if I had one of my own." Since word processors are available,

these choices must be individual.

A number of the students expressed great confidence in their ability to edit as they wrote. This might be explained in part because admission requirements at the university are such that the student body is selective. All twenty-five agreed that the word processor did not improve the quality of the content of their themes.

The confidence in the students' ability to edit as they wrote is encouraging, unlike that of the one graduate student who received her B.S. at another institution. This student remarked, "I never could spell. I love the word processor!"

In addition to the students interviewed, the head librarian, the reference librarian, and a library clerk were interviewed. The head librarian claimed that she is an extremely fast typist, can create as she types and, if re-typing is ever necessary, she can do that much faster than she can "manipulate material around the screen." The clerk uses the word processor and finds it time saving. She cited the example that she simply changes the date on her essay for admission to higher institutions of learning prior to going for an interview. The reference librarian doesn't use the word processor for her own writing, but she does use it when she edits the work of others. (She edits the paper put out by an organization to which she belongs.)

Stress on the eyes from reading text on a screen has been reported and written about. However, this is personal and can be attributed to a number of factors; nevertheless, it should be

considered.

As a result of the survey herein reported, it seems that the use of the word processor is a matter of personal choice with such things as convenience, speed, storage and print-outs on the plus side and "no felt need" on the minus side.

The "no felt need" and the remarks of the one graduate student raise the question, "What's wrong with learning the basics first?" The National Commission for Employment Policy, appointed by President Reagan, came up with a few answers, on which Mary Lee Shalvoy (7) reports.

Commission member, Dr. Daniel Q. Mills, a Professor of Business Administration at Harvard University explained that most of the Commission agreed "that the basic skills should be taught first, then computers next". They believed that if computers are stressed, then basic skills are lost.

Carol Romero, acting staff director in Washington said, "It's not the fact of computers in the schools that worries the commission members. They are concerned about what happens once the computers are there. We do believe that computers should not be used to substitute for any of the basic skills."

Gertrude McDonald, who chaired the commission, said, "Individual schools and communities must get together and work out what's needed to prepare their workforce." This seems important in view of the fact that the commission found that "computers in grades K-12 are potentially valuable educational tools."

It is interesting, enlightening and encouraging to learn that

concerns about the use of word processors are concerns of other nations as well as ours. A couple of examples follow:

A report by Burges and Piercy (1) in The Times Higher Education Supplement reveals their strong feelings about the word processor issue. They write about "a dangerously misleading myth," the myth being "that the availability of word processors can turn academics into prolific authors, producing perfect, camera-ready typescripts for the printers." Their belief is "that every hour an academic spends working on a word processor to correct errors or reformat work, to repaginate documents, and so on, is one hour less spent actually writing, researching or teaching." (Actually, there is research to defend the position that the use of word processors has not resulted in a better quality of composition content).

Burges and Piercy feel that there is no warrant for two associated myths: "that doing revision and redrafting on a screen is faster" and "that academics can produce transcripts of the same quality as those produced by professional operators." They add parenthetically, "Drawing red lines on a manuscript to re-position text is actually rather quicker than "walking" text round a screen."

Burges and Piercy continue, "There is still much to be said for a writer to seek the self-discipline of clarifying ideas by hand-drafting and revising, at least until the final draft. There is a high degree of self-indulgence in a cycle of excessive re-drafting, which is wasteful in the extreme."

Tom Wilson (8), Head of the Department of Information Studies, University of Sheffield is well aware of the "myths" described by Burges and Piercy and also of the "defects, deficiencies and dangers" in computer systems written about by others; nevertheless, Wilson "defends the need for word processors as academic support systems."

Whatever the final decision about the use of word processors, it is hoped that the uniqueness of the individual student will be given top priority, as (for various reasons) what is right for one may not be for another; in fact it might be detrimental.

One final question: Can technology offer any innovation that can teach a student integrity in his/her writing? It is felt that anyone who is extremely proficient in the use of language but uses it in such a way as to distort the truth should be challenged on his/her integrity, not on his/her writing ability.

Conclusions

It is concluded that the word processor can enhance the teaching of written composition but that it should never be used as a substitute for teaching the basic elements that go into good writing.

It is further concluded that the uniqueness of the individual concerned should be recognized and respected insofar as using the word processor is concerned.

Implications

Teachers must decide what they expect to find in good writing and teach toward these goals.

Content area teachers should consider requiring a type of writing other than that of giving back material ingested in the classroom. Teaching of this kind of writing should not be left entirely to teachers of English.

Give some thought to teaching the basics of good writing first as this should prove beneficial with or without the word processor.

Recognize and respect the uniqueness of each student in determining how best to meet his/her needs.

It might be beneficial to study some of the factors that may possibly have a bearing on students' use of the word processor -- factors such as typing ability, courses of study, dyslexia, peer pressure, knowledge of basics, and various physical and/or mental stresses.

Cost-effectiveness should be given consideration as some investigators and teachers have had success in teaching writing skills without the aid of expensive technological innovations.

Encourage integrity in all writing.

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